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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: VICE PRESIDENT ATIKU MULLS A PROMOTION

REF: ABUJA 2862

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASONS 1.5 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary: Vice President Atiku Abubakar wants to be Nigeria's next President; however, he no longer wants to wait for 2007. Competing ambitions and mutual mistrust have placed Atiku and Obasanjo on a collision course. Atiku thinks he can snatch the PDP Presidential nomination from an unpopular, weakened Obasanjo. However, an open challenge to Obasanjo would be untidy, cause convulsions within the PDP, and increase the sense of political uncertainty throughout Nigeria. As Atiku inches closer to his decision on challenging Obasanjo, he also must gauge how many of his ostensible supporters pushing him are genuine or whether their efforts are designed to turn Obasanjo and Atiku into enemies. Instinctually, Atiku may be a better politician than Obasanjo, but Atiku is also more representative of Nigeria's traditional monetized politics than the reformist, too often coarse Obasanjo. Atiku does advocate privatization and other economic reforms, yet he also is closely associated with "business as usual" and allegedly a party to corruption. Reftel reported Atiku's account of current events and his role in them. Much of what Atiku stated is true, but we do not believe that he is nearly as passive, or as blameless, as he claims. This cable provides Embassy's assessment of Atiku's role in the conundrum that is Nigerian politics today. End summary.

12. (C) Vice President Atiku occupies a position most ambitious politicians find uncomfortable. The safest bet and the most statesmanlike thing would be to stand pat as the number two on Obasanjo's ticket. However, given Atiku's ambition and his withering relationship with the President, Atiku would chafe at four more years under Obasanjo. Seeking the top office has a compelling attraction; it is equally foreboding. Should he maneuver wisely, Atiku will ascend the greasy political pole to become Nigeria's Chief Magistrate. Should he make the wrong move, political oblivion would likely be next. Moreover, history may indict Atiku for letting personal ambition blind him to the imperatives of national political stability.

HOW IT STARTED

13. (C) Despite his claim that Obasanjo drafted him (reftel), most accounts indicate Atiku was not Obasanjo's first choice as running-mate. Obasanjo initially discounted Atiku as a customs officer with blots on his reputation. However, the PDP's strength was built on two main foundations: One was the clout of former Head of State Ibrahim Babangida and other retired generals; the other was the PDM, the "progressive" grassroots political network established by the late General Shehu Yar'Adua. While the generals' support was essential getting Obasanjo's candidacy started and securing the PDP nomination, Obasanjo would need PDM members as his campaign foot soldiers to win the general election. Atiku had inherited the leadership of the PDM from Yar'Adua. Atiku became Obasanjo's running-mate because of this political reality.

14. (C) The two men meshed during the first two and a half years of the Administration. As Vice President Atiku shepherded the economic portfolio, presiding over the Administration's ambitious privatization initiative. Atiku had wide latitude in appointing heads of parastatals and party officials as well. The VP maintained control of the PDM faction within the party, albeit the PDM had weakened since the election in 1999. He compensated by extending his influence throughout the party, particularly in the National Secretariat and among PDP National Assembly Members. Atiku

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quietly positioned himself as perhaps the single most influential person in the PDP machinery, eclipsing even Obasanjo.

ELECTORAL JOCKEYING MUDDIES THE WATER

15. (C) By the end of 2001, electoral pressures began to mire the relationship with Obasanjo. Works and Housing Minister Tony Anenih and NSA Aliyu Mohammed helped drive the wedge between Obasanjo and Atiku. Wanting to be the main PDP apparatchik, Anenih saw Atiku as a rival. This rivalry was compounded by Anenih's desire also to control the PDM, where heretofore he was a important but lesser player than Atiku. Anenih began canvassing Northern Governors -- particularly Kaduna's Makarfi and Bauchi's Mu'azu -- to possibly replace Atiku as Obasanjo's second. Anenih did not hide his machinations, hoping Atiku would find out. Atiku did.

16. (C) NSA Mohammed's reason for poisoning the Obasanjo-Atiku relationship were less apparent but may have been the child of Mohammed's own inchoate electoral ambitions or Aliyu may have been working at the behest of Babangida. At the beginning of the year, Babangida reportedly (and repeatedly) delivered messages to the President that his support was contingent on Obasanjo jettisoning Atiku. Babangida saw Atiku as a potent rival to the mantle of the North's preeminent political player and heir apparent to the presidency in 2007.

17. (C) Rumors of Atiku's testing the political currents were not completely unfounded. Notwithstanding Anenih's scurrilous behavior, the unraveling of the Obasanjo-Atiku relationship may have been pre-ordained by a combination of Atiku's quiet but strong ambition and Obasanjo's patent unpopularity. Early this year, Atiku tasked a group of advisors and scholars to develop a National Development Program, a macro-economic blueprint for Nigeria. A more intimate sub-group began assessing Atiku's and Obasanjo's respective electoral prospects. The findings that Atiku was more popular than his boss encouraged the VP's thinking of an independent political future. This undertaking commissioned by Atiku did not go unnoticed by the Presidency. Obasanjo's April electoral announcement only worsened matters. Not only did Anenih attempt to schedule the rally when Atiku was abroad, when Obasanjo himself mounted the rostrum to speak, he omitted to mention the Vice President as his running-mate.

Despite this glaring omission, Obasanjo temporized for several weeks before making a tepid statement naming Atiku as his running-mate. (Note: Even today, the large campaign signs only display Obasanjo's name. END Note.) For the second time, political necessity forced an unenthusiastic Obasanjo to embrace Atiku, their partnership returning to its original form as the political equivalent of a shotgun wedding.

IMPEACHMENT - THE MAJOR OPENING

18. (C) The relationship between the President and Atiku deteriorated swiftly. Supporters within and without the party pressured Atiku to announce his candidacy; speculation about the VP's intentions became a regular media theme. Moreover, the National Assembly's impeachment threat furthered Atiku's leaning toward going it alone, and the jury is out whether Atiku helped orchestrate the impeachment move. However, as Atiku himself admits, he has not used his considerable political influence to rescue Obasanjo. Atiku's claim that his passivity is a result of accusations of betrayal by Obasanjo's advisors is convenient but unconvincing. If Atiku's interests were served by Obasanjo emerging unscathed from the impeachment threat, he would have pitched a helping hand. This also would have been the best way to refute allegations of betrayal.

AN ATIKU CANDIDACY: PROBABLE, BUT STILL UNCERTAIN

19. (C) A recent meeting of the PDP Board of Trustees was devoted to a discussion of an alternative to Obasanjo. Obasanjo's foes are becoming more numerous and bolder in their pronouncements, sensing his weakness and inability to sanction them for opposing him. Obasanjo is in real danger of losing the PDP nomination. Atiku could help resuscitate Obasanjo's chances with a strong show of support; however, he seems more interested in positioning himself to take

advantage of Obasanjo's decline. Atiku is pacing on the sidelines, giving tacit encouragement to Obasanjo's foes and hoping that growing opposition within the party will grind Obasanjo's reelection dreams to a halt. He probably hopes Obasanjo will decide to throw in the towel and not seek renomination. This would minimize future accusations of betrayal. If Obasanjo proves stubborn and continues with his candidacy, Atiku may wait until the last minute to publicly break with the President. By that time and with Obasanjo facing a wall of opposition, Atiku could be "drafted" as the only candidate that represents both newness and continuity, thus reconciling the fragments of an internally embattled political party. (Note: However, we have heard from one source that Atiku tendered his resignation late September but was persuaded to retract it. We cannot substantiate this and Atiku did not confirm this during his frank discussion reported reftel. End Note)

10. (C) Atiku would be a formidable candidate. Over the years, particularly the last three as Vice President, he has amassed a sizable fortune through both legitimate and questionable means. Taking a page from the Babangida manual, Atiku has spread his largesse wisely, developing a network of elected politicians, traditional leaders, government officials and businessmen who owe him favors. While, in its totality, his network is not as influential or affluent as Babangida's, it likely surpasses those of any other politician. However, an important consideration for Atiku is the substantial overlap between his network and Babangida's. Many of the same businessmen who profited from their ties to Babangida in the early nineties have a similar relationship with Atiku now. The question of who controls the loyalty of these figures may be a key factor in a Babangida-Atiku contest for influence.

11. (C) While a formidable candidate, hurdles standing in Atiku's way include:

-- Obasanjo: If he fails to win re-nomination, Obasanjo will blame Atiku. He could well use the rest of his tenure to reign vindictiveness on the Vice President, seeking to block his PDP nomination and his election.

-- North: Atiku is not well respected by many in the Northern political class. He is not from the Northwest, the heart of the region's political power, and is considered an upstart of modest pedigree. Moreover, some see Atiku, although a Moslem, as anti-Islamic because of his public statements against Shari'a. For his and other reasons, he has been in a running feud with the ACF, the principal Northern political organization. Finally, many northerners see Atiku as having done far too little for their region.

-- Southwest: If seen as having torpedoed Obasanjo, Atiku would face opposition in the Southwest. While not enamored with Obasanjo, many Yorubas would still see Atiku's candidacy as the beginning of the dreaded return to national power of the Northern elite, even though Atiku is disliked by many Northerners. One way to minimize this backlash would be to select a Yoruba running mate. Longtime friend Lagos State Governor Bola Tinubu has been rumored for that slot. However, bringing Tinubu into the PDP from the AD would cause ripples within the PDP and possible opposition from the AD. While the Southwest could be especially problematic, Atiku has also tried to court governors from the South-South and Southeast as well.

-- Religion: Although Atiku is not considered a devout Moslem, religious tensions could grow if he fails to choose a Christian running mate. (Tinubu is Moslem.)

-- Disloyalty Factor: While (almost) all is fair in Nigerian politics, Atiku will be walking uncharted territory by challenging Obasanjo. Many Nigerians may not want to reward him for what seems like a betrayal of the President. Then there is the matter of blatant hypocrisy. Only a few months ago Atiku publicly stated he would rather be Obasanjo's VP than head his own ticket. Atiku seems to be banking on the belief that Obasanjo is so unpopular, the people will view Atiku's challenge as a rescue rather than a betrayal.

-- Corruption Factor: Atiku is considered corrupt by many people. Obasanjo or an ally could present an "Atiku Dossier" before the ICPC, the federal anti-corruption commission, or to the general public. An Obasanjo ally has already filed a case against another Obasanjo foe, House Speaker Ghali Na'Abba.

The Babangida Factor

112. (C) The Vice -President told us that Babangida has urged him to run. Atiku reportedly has reciprocated Babangida's support with the promise to be a one-term President, thus opening the door to Babangida in 2007. However, taking Babangida's encouragement at face value could be dangerous. Babangida's baseline political objective is to remain the North's preeminent political actor. Atiku represents a known threat to that aspiration. If Atiku supplants Obasanjo, Atiku becomes the most important political player in Nigeria and the North by virtue of his office and the power it affords. Moreover, the wily Babangida knows Atiku's one-term promise is utterly unenforceable. Babangida probably is not encouraging Atiku to run so that he can win, but to break the erstwhile Obasanjo-Atiku alliance. Babangida is probably calculating that the best way to defeat Obasanjo and Atiku is to divide and conquer the duo by exploiting and increasing their mutual mistrust. By forcing Atiku's hand now when he is not quite ready, Babangida would not have to contend in 2007 with an Atiku flush with the benefits of four additional years of incumbency. Babangida's play could conceivably destroy Atiku politically and irrevocably.

COMMENT

113. (C) The signs of the time point to Atiku challenging Obasanjo. It is significant that the VP is not helping Obasanjo contend with the impeachment battle. Nowadays, the two rarely speak or meet privately. Meanwhile, Atiku is marshalling his strength within the party. He is talking to PDP State Governors and members of the party NEC. A cagey operator, Atiku is letting others stalk Obasanjo while he awaits the right time to move. Atiku can only gain the Presidency in 2003 by emerging from Obasanjo's shadow, but, in doing so, he also exposes himself to political jeopardy. This is Atiku's dilemma. He thinks he can sprint past Obasanjo to seize the PDP nomination, but what he does not know is who, beside Obasanjo, will oppose his ambitions. Atiku claims Babangida has told him to run. However, he must wonder if Babangida is laying in wait to ambush him politically.

114. (C) As a candidate, Atiku presents a mix of good and bad. Hands down, he is a more astute politician than Obasanjo. Atiku would not commit the many insensitive blunders that have undermined Obasanjo's popularity and cause so much friction between the Executive and Legislature and the President and the political elite. He has been a friend of the private sector and the business community. He also is friendly toward the United States, would seek a good relationship and would not try to undermine our interests in Nigeria. However, he is considered venal and has used his position to accumulate significant business interests that enriched him and his cronies.

115. (C) Atiku is an accomplished practitioner of the politics of business as usual. As such, his commitment to fight corruption and promote genuine economic reform is suspect. All in all, Atiku grades much better than Obasanjo on style; but on substance, he probably brings to the table much less of what Nigerians need or want to secure a better and different future.
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